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Empowering Our Ministry: The Worship of God

Psalm 15

Thomas Michael Smith
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(Reconstructed from short sermon outline) The worship of God, what we do here on Sunday mornings, is very important. But though it's important to gather in a place (as opposed to gathering with a foursome on a golf course), this gathering is not what the general call to worship is all about. Psalm 15 calls us to be with God so that our whole life is one continuous worship service, everywhere and all the time. And Psalm 15 describes the person who is able to worship God. This Psalm does not set our goal - the person who is described in verses two through the end of the Psalm, is not a person we can become by trying to be good at the characteristics described. Indeed, the hymn in our Presbyterian Hymnal that uses Psalm 15 as the basis (#164), misses the point; the hymn writer tries to say that the person who is able to develop into that kind of person will then be able to purchase a ticket to dwell on God's holy hill. Is that the way it works? I don't think so. I believe that what the psalmist is trying to say to us is that if we commit ourselves to be with God in all-the-time worship, we will be made into that kind of person.

God is saying, "I want you." And then God says, "Do you want to be wanted?" That's what's going on in the Bible. That's the story of an amazing, incredible love, and a good way to portray our response to that love.

Let me tell you a few stories you probably already know. The first concerns a people who were enslaved in Egypt. They had it very hard, and their God came to them and asked them if they wanted to leave and be free. Their God said, 'I want you. Do you want to be wanted?' In a person by the name of Moses, they said yes, and after some twists and turns, they were free. They had been found. They had been given a new life.

But immediately they complained. Their complaint was their way of saying they now weren't sure whether they wanted to be wanted. So God came to them again and said, "I want you." And the way God showed that He did want them was to provide them manna for food, and water from a rock, and a cloud to follow by day, and a pillar of fire to follow at night.

After a bit, these people came to a mountain that had a sense of the holy about it. Their leader went up the mountain to encounter the God of the universe. Down below, the people became impatient. They cried out, 'What have you done for me today?' and hearing no answer that satisfied, they decided to build for themselves a god they could control, a calf made of gold. In a very short time, they had forgotten the God who said, "I want you." And in their forgetting they said, "We don't want to be wanted by You."

After they had a party or two, Moses came down from meeting with the God of the universe, bearing some tablets of stone on which God wrote down a treaty between Himself and this people whom He had freed from slavery in Egypt. The people mostly said they were sorry and God mostly repeated Himself by saying, "I want you. Do you want to be wanted?"

The people put God's treaty copies into a box of acacia wood, the name of which most of us know only because of a movie with Harrison Ford. Yes, the ark. Was God in that ark? No. God's set of treaty tablets with His people were in that ark. But after a time, the people began to think of the ark as God's location with them.

Eventually, God brought His people into the Promised Land. They set up their homes and began to live their lives. Every so often, some national crisis would develop, and to meet that need, God would 'raise up' a judge, a person filled with the Holy Spirit who would adjudicate disputes or lead the people in a war against those who would bring more slavery. When the judge died, there might be a generation without a judge, because one wasn't needed. When the need was present, God stepped in and appointed a new judge.

But at a one point, the people looked around and saw the other nations that bordered Israel, and saw that they had a king. So they told Samuel, who was the judge at the time, that they wanted a king. Part of the problem was that Samuel had some sons who thought that they would get to be judges too, and they saw this not as an opportunity to serve God but as an opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of the people - they were completely corrupt. That there weren't supposed to be judges-in-waiting was an important point that escaped Samuel's attention, to his discredit. But the problem was with God's people too, who whined and complained that they wanted to be like their next door neighbor who had a king.

Samuel was pretty upset about this and thought it was a rejection of his leadership. It was, to some extent, at least a rejection of the possibility of his sons' leadership, but God jumped in at reminded Samuel that He was around, and that the people were really rejecting Him, not Samuel or his kids. God said, "I want them (my people). But they don't seem to want to be wanted."

God could have been upset about all of this but decided then (as He continues to decide today) to work through the consequences, and gave them what they wanted, though He warned them it wouldn't be as good an idea as they thought. Essentially, God told them that kings were OK as long as they remembered the covenant and honored God with their hands as well as their lips. Kings, like people, forget what God says, that "I want you. Do you want to be wanted?" But the problem is that kings have lots more power and can do lots more damage. But God gave them a king. And how many good kings were there? What? Maybe two or three out of fifty? God must have been holding back a 'see what I told you,' but since He's a lot more patient than we are, and since He can work through the consequences better than anybody, He let it ride.

After a while, one of their kings, David, told God that everybody's god had a nice house, but the God of the universe didn't, so David wanted to build him a house of fine cedar. God thought about it a bit and talked it over with the prophet Nathan, and said, "Well, why do I need a house?' You see, the people continued to miss the point. God says, "I want you. Do you want to be wanted?" And the people say, 'We want a golden calf, or we want a king, or we want a house to put God into.' We want a way to ignore the basic question, 'Do you want to be wanted?' So we, the people, keep coming up with different things that will satisfy, only to find the thing doesn't satisfy, and we want something else. God let David's son Solomon build the house, and it was a really nice place, but it too got in the way.

Do you remember the story, early in the timeline, when the ark was captured by the Philistines? Young King David got it back and brought it 'home' to the city of Jerusalem. David was so glad that the ark was back with the people that when he brought it back into the city, he stripped down to base essentials and literally danced through the streets of the city, worshipping God, twirling and whirling with joy. His wife, daughter of his predecessor King Saul, a very wealthy and proper woman, was

shocked to see this display of public social ineptitude. Who didn't get the point? David's wife. She was caught up in rules and human-engineered restrictions, and missed the point that the worship of God should and does catch us up and fill us with joy. Maybe she was a Presbyterian?

Psalm 15 speaks to a people who need to be reminded of what God says, "I want you. Do you want to be wanted?" We are to be a people who sojourn with our nomadic God, pack the tent and unpack the tent, God-with-us all the time, our worship done with joy all the time. Or, we are to be a people who dwell on His holy hill, not a people who think of worship as entering and exiting a physical place like our sanctuary here.

If you want to be the person described in Psalm 15, you will decide, today, to sojourn with God, or to dwell with God, all of the time, or most of the time, and if you do, you will see yourself made into the person described. Look at the person, read the characteristics. We won't get there by trying to get there. In fact, our trying to get there is tantamount to asking for a king to rule over us. It misses the point.

Bottom line: God wants you. Do you want to be wanted? I do. I hope and pray you do too.

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